

**The runner-up entry for SNAP  
Student New Angle Prize 2016**



**The Sailmaker**

by

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The tear could be mended but it would leave a scar. The sailmaker stepped back to look over his work. Stooped, shoulders sagging, he reminisced.

They'd been magnificent on their first voyage, Sailing Barges Victoria and Poppy, sails hoisted, reflections glimmering. Perfect sailing weather. The sailmaker stood tall. The pristine barges took their turns to and from the mill, bearing their full loads of linseed flour in one direction and linseed oil in the other, with grace and strength, their small crew expert in their tasks.

Those were the early days, the Suffolk days. As the tides rolled in and out, so did the weeks, the months, the seasons. For the men life seemed predictable and though their work was hard, in its routine it was comfortable. Whilst the men were fed and cared for by their womenfolk, they, in turn, nurtured their 'girls' - the barges. They worked hard, both men and vessels. The sailmaker would see them too, from time to time, his sails danced with the wind. Yes, they looked good. Smiling, he would nod an acknowledgement.

Change can be brutal. The days of moving linseed ended. Abruptly. There was talk of war. Rumours. Talk of war became fear of war. Fear became reality and everything changed. Unfamiliar waters and unfamiliar cargo. London. The bustle of the city wrapped around the 'girls' with intimacy as they snuggled against the river bank, incognito amongst the daily urban activity, waiting with anticipation. An excitement would mount as trucks arrived with their wares. Loading began, the tide turned, the boats were on their way. The men and their barges were quiet and efficient. The place was different but the process was the same. That sameness brought a little comfort. With stealth, the barges, the men and the precious, deadly cargo of ammunition made their way along the river.

One summer night the war lashed out, changing everything again. Not just a summer night, but a beautiful one, the moon shining, tide rising, spirits high. The trucks were approaching. And then it happened. It was all so quick. Sirens wailed, the trucks stopped – lurking as shadows. A sound overhead, a whistling, a crack, then flames and sparks. Sailing Barge Poppy swayed and pitched, her men struggling to stay on their feet, fighting to keep their vessel safe as lighted shards attacked her. As they won their own battle they looked to their side. Victoria was in flames.

And then it was over. Poppy and her men motionless. Damage and injuries had been inflicted though nothing appeared irreparable. Of Sailing Barge Victoria and her crew there was no sign, just a few pieces of charred wood floating on the Thames. Two men had lost their lives and two more had lost their comrades.

The sailmaker packed away his tools; he was finished here. One last glance towards the docks and a lone Poppy. He nodded an acknowledgement and walked away.

